

them, but Baba would stand in the doorway. "Go on, now," he'd say. "This is grown-ups' time. Why don't you go read one of those books of yours?" He'd close the door, leave me to wonder why it was *always* grown-ups' time with him. I'd sit by the door, knees drawn to my chest. Sometimes I sat there for an hour, sometimes two, listening to their laughter, their chatter.

The living room downstairs had a curved wall with custom-built cabinets. Inside sat framed family pictures: an old, grainy photo of my grandfather and King Nadir Shah taken in 1931, two years before the king's assassination; they are standing over a dead deer, dressed in knee-high boots, rifles slung over their shoulders. There was a picture of my parents' wedding night, Baba dashing in his black suit and my mother a smiling young princess in white. Here was Baba and his best friend and business partner, Rahim Khan, standing outside our house, neither one smiling—I am a baby in that photograph and Baba is holding me, looking tired and grim. I'm in his arms, but it's Rahim Khan's pinky my fingers are curled around.

The curved wall led into the dining room, at the center of which was a mahogany table that could easily sit thirty guests—and, given my father's taste for extravagant parties, it did just that almost every week. On the other end of the dining room was a tall marble fireplace, always lit by the orange glow of a fire in the wintertime.

A large sliding glass door opened into a semicircular terrace that overlooked two acres of backyard and rows of cherry trees. Baba and Ali had planted a small vegetable garden along the eastern wall: tomatoes, mint, peppers, and a row of corn that never really took. Hassan and I used to call it "the Wall of Ailing Corn."

On the south end of the garden, in the shadows of a loquat tree, was the servants' home, a modest little mud hut where Hassan lived with his father.

It was there, in that little shack, that Hassan was born in